



Hutu and Tutsi Men Working Side By Side in Hillbrow to Challenge the Gender Stereotypes Driving the Spread of HIV and AIDS.

By Alex Doniach and Dean Peacock





In Johannesburg's notoriously rough inner city community of Hillbrow refugee men have come together despite ethnic differences that have elsewhere led to genocide to provide each other with support and to challenge the gender stereotypes that threaten men and women's wellbeing.

Pascal Akimana still shivers when he thinks of the gruesome atrocities he witnessed in the Burundian civil war. The women who were forced to murder their own children by soldiers. The men who beat him with stones until he cried in pain. Today he is a refugee living safely in Johannesburg, but he is still haunted by the nightmares of his past. Akimana (24) is a small man with high cheekbones, a focused stare and a soft voice. He comes from a Hutu family and was almost killed three times by the Tutsi rebel army. Although he was trained to hate and kill Tutsis in Burundi, he is one of almost 2,000 Burundian refugees who, on South African soil, have learned to forgive. "In South Africa we are all brothers. What tribe you were born into is irrelevant here", Akimana said. But not all refugees who flee safely to Johannesburg are as optimistic as Akimana. Many are angry and traumatised, Akimana said.

The life of a refugee is brutal, said Akimana, who is one of more than 500,000 Burundian refugees who fled war and death in their home country and poured across African borders including South Africa's, according to the United Nations Refugee Agency. When Akimana reached the border, his feet were swollen and bloody. He had no money and slept on the streets until he found odd jobs and was able to buy food and rent a room in Yeoville. But, like many others, Akimana was thankful to have finally reached South Africa. Here he qualified for refugee status and though he struggles to survive, he no longer lives in constant fear of torture or death.

Bonaventure Kageruka tells a story that mirrors that of Akimana's. He too experienced the horrors of war and ethnic hatred. As a Rwandan Tutsi, only he and his sister survived the 1994 genocide; she was raped and is now living with HIV. "We used to be called cockroaches and snakes", he says. "I was deprived of all fundamental rights. We could not have a say because we were a minority. "This situation resulted in many civil wars and eventually the genocide in 1994, where around one million Tutsis and some Hutus lost their lives in 100 days at the hands of the Hutu majority". Kageruka travelled to South Africa nearly two years ago. Here his experiences have been decidedly mixed. On the one hand, he has received support from various refugee groups and faith based organizations but has also been held up at gun point multiple times.

Like Kageruka and Akimana, Desire Masabararza (34) has worked hard to make South Africa home. He sees himself as one of the refugees who have thrived since crossing the border into this country. He was forced to flee Burundi after the start of war because he came from a mixed home. His father was a Hutu, and his mother a Tutsi leaving him with no safe side to take. "I couldn't run to the Hutu side or the Tutsi side so I decided to run away," Masabararza said.

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Masabarakrza is a tall man with a wide grin and gregarious demeanour. Sitting in the well decorated living room of his Yeoville apartment, he smiles as he talks candidly about the harrowing years he struggled to start a new life in Johannesburg. “When I finally made it into Johannesburg I only had one rand,” Masabarakrza said. “I spent 50 cents to buy a carton of eggs and 50 cents to make a phone call. When I put the change in the phone, the machine ate my money.” Masabarakrza’s spirit wasn’t deterred. He had a contact in South Africa, another Burundian, who he was told could help him. Masabarakrza’s didn’t eat for the first three days in the country, but eventually he connected with other refugees and found a bed to sleep on. Home Affairs granted him refugee status and he worked hard. “I did anything to make money without stealing,” he said. “I sold tomatoes on the street, I worked as a security guard.” Eventually he worked his way into a stable job as an electrician, his trained profession in Burundi. Today he lives a good life in a well furnished home with his wife and three year old daughter. “Today life is good,” he said.

Since 1993, the Department of Home Affairs has maintained an open door policy that grants asylum and refugee status to many that apply. Theoretically, refugees are guaranteed the same rights and privileges as any South African and even more, because they are also granted international protection, said Nkosana Sibuyi, spokesperson for the department.

But, life in South Africa has not been easy for refugees where the quality of life is often poor. Over two thirds of refugees had experience in skilled and semi skilled jobs upon arriving in South Africa, but here most of them are unable to find work, according to the UNHCR. Even still many refugees would rather struggle here than return to a country ravaged by decades of brutal tensions and civil war.

Malita Sunjic, the UNHCR spokesperson for South Africa, said the UN policy in South Africa does not give additional money or aid to refugees, because instead they are given the right to live in the country and enjoy the benefits of the SA Constitution. This means they have access to healthcare and education for their children.

“Once they come here, they get the freedom of not living in a refugee camp, but they also get the responsibility of fending for themselves,” Sunjic said.

With little support from the South African government or the United Nations, refugees like Pascal Akimana, Bonaventure Kageruka and Desire Masabarakrza have found support, a sense of purpose and greater optimism through their participation in the South African Men as Partners Network, an initiative coordinated by EngenderHealth in collaboration with dozens of other organizations across the country.

Invited to attend MAP workshops at the Esselen Street Clinic in Hillbrow, Akimana and Kageruka spent four days in intense reflection with other refugee men from Francophone Africa talking about their experiences of male socialization. Led by a mixed team of South African and refugee facilitators, they explored their understandings of masculinity and manhood. Akimana remembers being struck by the commonalities in the men’s stories. Irrespective of what country men were from all had been taught that being a “real man” meant always being in charge, being the provider, never backing down, having the final word, drinking alcohol and having multiple sexual partners. Kageruka and Akimana remembered being struck by the realization that men’s quest to prove their manhood was an important and neglected cause of many of the problems they were struggling with-war, rape, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS and crime.

Reflecting on his own past as a war survivor and a refugee, Akimana quickly saw the parallels between his own experiences of violence and the violence that women face on a daily basis. During the workshop, he said he saw that every day women are forced to live with the same sort of fear he experienced in Burundi and on his journey to South Africa. He realized that, like refugees, women are always wondering whether they are safe.

Both said they had been looking for a way to make a difference in their new country. Akimana says, “I realized at that workshop that I could work with other refugee men to address violence and HIV/AIDS”. He quickly signed up as a volunteer with EngenderHealth and now runs MAP workshops, and organizes community education events in Johannesburg’s inner city.

Dumisani Rebombo, Esselen Street MAP Project coordinator for EngenderHealth, says there is a clear need to work with refugee men. Thousands of refugees flow into Johannesburg each year and they comprise some of the poorest of the city’s residents. The high levels of trauma among the fledgling communities that reside mostly in Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville can lead to high levels of gender based violence, Rebombo said. Similarly, the high concentration of single men living in isolated communities far from their families has supported the emergence of many brothels and high levels of commercial sex work, itself often associated with both HIV transmission and violence against sex workers. Kageruka concurs:

“We put so much focus on South Africans, but something needs to help the refugees. I feel that within a supportive group, we can help make a change”.

Now, in Hillbrow, Kageruka and Akimana are work closely together, Hutu and Tutsi often standing on either side of the flipchart at the front of the room, talking about violence, gender equality and human rights. On a Tuesday morning in June, 29 men and women gather in a brick room in the Esselen Clinic for a MAP workshop, under fluorescent lighting, the two men lead the group of refugees in activities and discussions that invite the men and women to speak out about the challenges and rewards of living in this new city. The group also discusses male role models, and the participants speak out about qualities they admire in men. Kageruka, shares his experiences with the group, saying sexism and gender roles are ingrained in Rwandans at a young age. “If you look at equity in homes, women work like donkeys, but what about the men who claim to be physically and morally strong? Do they use their power positively? In my home, my mother worked like a machine, looking after six children, three boys and girls and helping throughout the house. I never saw my father helping my mother. I witnessed this situation myself and I wondered what my mother has she done to undergo this diabolical situation?”

And the messages that Kageruka and Akimana attempt to convey are heard by the group’s participants. ‘Before I attended the workshop, I never thought of any of these things,’ said Laurence Kasadi, a refugee from DRC Congo. “In our country we often see women as machines, as objects. Now I have started to analyze a woman’s role in society. It isn’t something I took the time to do before. Informed by his own background, Kageruka says,



“I understand how freedom costs an arm and a leg, but with my voice I will raise it to set women free and stop HIV and AIDS.”

In an effort to offer continuity and follow up to those men who have participated in a MAP workshop and want to do something about gender inequality and HIV/AIDS, Akimana, Kageruka and colleagues from EngenderHealth started a MAP Community Action Team, or MAP CAT, that meets every other Saturday. Community Action Teams, or Cats were introduced to the MAP Network by EngenderHealth to emphasize community action and to promote community ownership of MAP. These groups now reach out to men in shebeens, on the street, at work or in taxis.

What makes the inner city MAP CAT initiative unique is its focus on supporting refugee men to organize in their communities to end violence against women and to address HIV and AIDS. One of the Hillbrow CAT members Albert Paye from the DRC Congo, is a skilled artist and has developed a series of posters depicting scenes of domestic and sexual violence or risky sexual behaviour. These posters are hung around public places such as shopping centres where a MAP CAT volunteer stands by the posters and ask passers-by their reaction to the images in an effort to spark dialogue about gender and HIV/AIDS.

Nhlanhla Mabizela (32), an EngenderHealth MAP project coordinator and a facilitator for the MAP CAT in Hillbrow, said CATs have helped in Hillbrow by targeting men who might not otherwise receive messages about HIV, violence and gender equality. “The Hillbrow program reaches men who are otherwise

often neglected or ostracised but who have a critical role to play in addressing HIV and AIDS". He says, "we hope the MAP CAT men will become more involved in a range of activities including home based care for people ill with AIDS, and broader community education". "And as they do this, we hope that South Africans will recognize their contribution to the country we share".

Dumisani Rebombo stresses that it's important that refugees are not just depicted as part of the problem but instead are recognized for what they contribute to society.

He says, "The MAP Network has been strengthened enormously by the contribution of refugees who bring many skills and a determination to make better lives for themselves".

He points to a recent community education event held in Hillbrow's Joubert Park and organized in significant part by the Hillbrow MAP CAT. Attended by over a thousand people, the event called on South African and refugee men alike to take a stand against violence and encouraged men to get tested for HIV.

The event also gave refugee men an opportunity to speak about their experiences. Pascal Akimana used the stage to help South Africans understand the experiences of refugees like himself. He said, "the Swahili people call us "wakimbizi". It means, "running". Imagine the road from Central Africa, West Africa, all the way to South Africa. No papers, no money, no food, because you can't run away with passports and visas, right! Family members lose each other on the road, husbands do not know where the wives are, the children are running away alone. Now you reach South Africa--is it really a paradise for refugees? No place to sleep, no food, babies crying on your back, you sleep in a park. The veterans of the park take away even the little you had left of your long journey. Jobless for 2 to 3 years, you turn into a street seller of "ama-bananas and ama-oranges". Nurses on the streets, doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, on the streets. Around all these conditions of living comes frustrations, which is a good incubator for family violence. Many families that used to be strong, are just falling apart.

Energised by this opportunity to share his experiences as a refugee, Akimana closes his speech by drawing on the same optimism and determination that kept him going on that long road from Burundi to Johannesburg. He says, "Let's strive for peace and unity for our beloved continent. From Cape to Cairo, from Mozambique to Mali, English, French, Zulu, Xhosa, let's hold hands together to build our beloved continent in our diversity.

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